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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to assist school districts in Florida in the implementation of the 1999 Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma. First, the specific state rules related to student performance standards, course descriptions, and graduation requirements are cited. Twenty-five questions and answers present the guidelines, which address: (1) general aspects (such as what a special diploma is, what the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma are, and what areas these standards address); (2) implementation timelines (when the standards go into effect, standards for students who entered high school prior to 1999-2000, and time limits for achieving the standards); (3) state/district assessments (eligibility for exemption from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and alternate assessment); (4) levels of functioning (levels of functioning for the standards, responsibilities of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team regarding levels of functioning, and use of assistive technology); (5) documentation of achievement (documentation by the IEP of expected levels of functioning, measurement of attainment of the standards, and achievement documentation by teachers. A list of expected levels of functioning is attached. (DB)

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Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma
Technical Assistance Paper

Florida State Department of Education
Division of Public Schools and Community Education
Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services

May 2000

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Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma

BACKGROUND

The Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma were adopted by the State Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education in the fall of 1999. The following rules were revised and approved:

- Rule 6A-1.09401, FAC, Student Performance Standards
- Rule 6A-1.0941, FAC, Minimum Student Performance Standards
- Rule 6A-1.09414, FAC, Course Descriptions for Grades 6-12, Exceptional Student Education
- Rule 6-1.0996, FAC, Graduation Requirements for Certain Students with Disabilities

Rule 6-1.0996, FAC, was republished to satisfy the concerns of the Joint Administrative Procedures Committee. This rule was previously published and adopted by the State Board of Education in August 1999 under the prefix number "6A," reflecting a rule under the authority of the State Board. However, in 1997, the Florida Legislature granted rule-making authority to the Commissioner of Education for this rule. Therefore, this rule has been re-promulgated under the prefix designation "6," reflecting such rule to be under authority of the Commissioner of Education.

This technical assistance paper has been developed to assist school districts in Florida in the implementation of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

General

1. What is a special diploma?

A special diploma is a type of diploma available for students with disabilities who have been identified as eligible for mentally handicapped, profoundly handicapped (i.e., autistic, dual-sensory impaired, profoundly mentally handicapped, and severely emotionally disturbed), emotionally handicapped, physically impaired, specific learning disabled, deaf or hard-of-hearing, and language impaired programs. The special diploma is a viable option for students with disabilities who are not able to meet the requirements for a standard diploma. Florida offers two types of special diplomas:

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Division of Public Schools
and Community Education
Bureau of Instructional Support
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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PAPERS are produced periodically by the Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services to present discussion of current topics. The TA Papers may be used for inservice sessions, technical assistance visits, parent organization meetings, or interdisciplinary discussion groups. Topics are identified by state steering committees, district personnel, and individuals, or from program compliance monitoring.

- ☐ Option 1 is based on student mastery of state-prescribed standards and accumulation of the minimum number of course credits specified by the local district school board.

- ☐ Option 2 is based on mastery of employment and community competencies.

2. What are the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?

The Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma are 14 high school exit standards set by the State of Florida that students with disabilities must achieve in order to be awarded a special diploma under Option 1.

3. What is the purpose of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?

The purpose of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma is to reflect high levels of expectations in the curriculum areas appropriate for students with disabilities. These standards support the attainment of the desired post-school outcomes of students with disabilities and the adaptations to content that may be necessary to meet the other educational needs that result from their individual disability.

4. What areas do the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma address?

The standards framework consists of domains, strands, standards, and benchmarks. Each strand contains standards with benchmarks reflecting independent, supported, and participatory levels of functioning. The domains and strands are listed below, with a summary statement for each strand.

- ☐ Domain: Curriculum and Learning Environment
  - —Strand A: Sunshine State Standards–addresses the student's participation in the Sunshine State Standards with modifications
  - —Strand B: Functional Academics–includes skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, mathematics, and problem solving
  - —Strand C: Life Work–includes skills related to deciding on a career, use of tools and technology, and employability
- ☐ Domain: Independent Functioning
  - —Strand A: Personal Care–includes skills for daily living, personal care, travel, and use of community resources
  - —Strand B: Self-Management–includes personal planning and decision-making skills and appropriate behavior in daily living and work
- ☐ Domain: Social and Emotional Behavior
  - —Strand A: Working with Others–focuses on working in groups and developing relationships with others
- ☐ Domain: Communication
  - —Strand A: Communicating with Others–addresses the ability to exchange communications

5. **What is the earliest age/grade at which an IEP can indicate the student is working on the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?**

This is an IEP team decision. However, all students must be given an opportunity to access the general curriculum and participate in state and district assessments, as appropriate. When the decision is made for a student to work toward the special standards instead of the regular standards, parents must have a clear understanding of the implications of this decision. It is critical for parents to be informed of the impact of this decision on the type of diploma that a student is eligible to receive, as well as on postsecondary education and career opportunities. Rule 6-1.0996, FAC, does specify that the diploma option shall be addressed on the IEP during the student's eighth grade year or during the school year of the student's fourteenth birthday, whichever occurs first. This decision shall be reviewed annually.

6. **Has the adoption of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma changed graduation requirements set by the state for students receiving a special diploma under Option 2?**

No. The state graduation requirements for Option 2 have not changed.

<u>Implementation Timelines</u>

7. **When do the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma go into effect?**

Students entering as freshmen in school year 1999-2000 whose individual educational plan (IEP) team has determined that the student will pursue a special diploma will be required to achieve the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma at the student's individually determined level of functioning. The IEP team will determine the expected level of functioning for each of the 14 standards.

8. **For students pursuing a special diploma who entered as freshmen in high school prior to school year 1999-2000, what standards must be achieved?**

Any student with disabilities who entered as a freshman in high school prior to school year 1999-2000 must master the Student Performance Standards for Florida Schools, 1996/97 – 2000/02, Exceptional Students, Reading, Writing, Language, Mathematics, and Social and Personal, based on his or her exceptionality. School districts should continue to complete the necessary documentation of the achievement of the Student Performance Standards for Florida Schools until the specified students are no longer being served by the school district.

9. **In order to be awarded a special diploma, when must a student achieve the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?**

These standards are high school exit standards. For a student to receive a special diploma, he or she must achieve the standards at the expected levels of functioning identified by the IEP team by the time of graduation. The student must also earn the required number of course credits as determined by the individual school district. However, graduation with a special diploma may not end the school district's responsibility to provide services to students with disabilities. These students are entitled to receive a free appropriate public education until they receive a standard diploma or its equivalent or until they reach the age of 22.

State/District Assessments

10. If a student is working on the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma, is it appropriate to exempt the student from taking the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and other district assessments?

Yes. One of the considerations in determining whether a student should participate in the FCAT or other district assessments is the expectation of the type of diploma to be awarded. If a student's curriculum and learning focuses on the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma, then the FCAT or district assessment would not necessarily be appropriate as an assessment of the student's progress. The IEP team must identify what alternate assessment methods would be used to assess progress.

11. Can a student with a disability be assessed using both an alternate assessment addressing the student's deficit area and partial testing on a state or district assessment?

Yes. This would be appropriate for students in the grades prior to high school for whom the IEP team has not yet made the determination that the student should be working toward the special standards. If there is any question regarding which standards, regular or special, are more appropriate for the student, the student should continue to work toward the regular standards with accommodations as necessary and participate as much as possible in the state and district assessment program.

12. When must the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma be assessed?

Students must be assessed on the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma with the same frequency that students are assessed on the Sunshine State Standards. Methods of alternate assessment must be identified on the IEP and should be provided at grades 3 through 10 or comparable ages. While all standards must eventually be mastered at IEP-prescribed levels of functioning, it is recommended that formal alternate assessment strategies at grades 3 through 10 address, at a minimum, the four standards in Functional Academics and the standard in Communicating with Others.

Levels of Functioning

13. What are the levels of functioning for the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?

Benchmarks are set at three possible levels of functioning for each standard: independent, supported, and participatory. These levels are defined below.

- ☐ Independent Level: Students are expected to be able to perform the behaviors identified for each benchmark on their own once they have mastered the knowledge and skills.

- ☐ Supported Level: Students are expected to be able to perform the behaviors identified for each benchmark with guidance and support: physical, verbal, and visual prompts, assistive technology, and supervision.

Participatory Level: Students are expected to participate with assistance in the performance of the behavior: personal physical assistance and assistive technology.

The IEP team should base its decisions regarding expected levels of functioning on what the student is projected to attain by the time of graduation. The IEP team needs to remember that these expected levels can change based on student progress.

14. Who determines the level of functioning that a student with disabilities must achieve on the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?

The IEP team identifies the expected level of functioning (independent, supported, or participatory benchmarks) for each standard whenever the IEP team decides a student should pursue a special diploma. The IEP team shall address the diploma decision during the student's eighth grade year or during the school year of the student's fourteenth birthday, whichever occurs first. This decision shall be reviewed annually.

15. How often must an IEP team address the levels of functioning for a student?

The IEP team must address the expected levels of functioning at least once each year. The most appropriate time for this review is at the annual IEP review. However, these levels could be addressed at any time an IEP team member feels it is necessary.

16. What may the IEP team use as a guide to determine expected levels of functioning?

The IEP team should review prior student achievement and progress in order to predict expected levels of functioning. Information documented in the present level of educational performance statements will also provide guidance to the team.

17. Is it possible to indicate that a student is expected to function at different levels for the different standards?

Yes. An IEP team may determine, for example, that the student is expected to function at the independent level on 3 standards, at the supported level on 6 standards, and at the participatory level on 5 standards.

18. May a student's expected levels of functioning change from year to year?

Yes. Actually, a student's expected levels of functioning may change anytime an IEP team determines it is appropriate to make changes.

19. If a student must use assistive technology to accomplish a task, can the student be considered as performing at an independent level of functioning?

Yes, if the assistive technology is accessed and used independently by the student, the student can be said to function at an independent level.

Documentation of Achievement

20. What may the IEP team use to document the expected levels of functioning for a student with a disability?

A sample form is attached for district use; however, this form is optional. Districts may choose to create a form or incorporate the information into existing documents. If a district chooses to incorporate the expected levels of functioning into the IEP document, these levels may be incorporated on the goal pages or another section of the IEP, as determined by the district.

21. How is attainment of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma measured?

Teachers may measure progress on the standards through a variety of methods. These methods would be comprised of various instructional activities and alternate assessment strategies. To facilitate the relationship among curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the benchmarks for the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma have been correlated to the course requirements in each exceptional student education (ESE) course.

22. How will teachers document the achievement of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma?

There is not a state requirement to separately document the achievement of the 14 standards for individual students. The revised *Course Descriptions for Exceptional Student Education, Grades 6-12* correlates the standards with the course requirements through the benchmarks representing the three levels of functioning. Therefore, when a student receives credit for passing the ESE coursework that includes all of the benchmarks at the student's identified level of functioning, it can be concluded that the student has achieved the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma.

23. Because all ESE courses are now multi-credit courses, how can teachers track student progress and prevent duplication of course requirements previously mastered?

Districts or schools may choose to develop a scope and sequence for specific courses that teachers may use as a guide. Teachers may also develop their own method of tracking student progress on course requirements. Another method available is the recently developed CD-ROM, *ESE Instruction Manager*. This CD has a section on student progress that enables a teacher to track student progress on course requirements and suggested performance objectives. To obtain a copy of the CD, contact the Clearinghouse Information Center, Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, 628 Turlington Building, 325 W. Gaines Street, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400; telephone: 850-488-1879; Suncom: 278-1879; or FAX 850-487-2679 and request product number 10519. The information from the CD will be available on the Florida Department of Education web site at the following address: http://www.firn.edu/doe/commhome/pub-home.

24. How may teachers track a student's progress in attaining the benchmarks for Standard 1 in the Curriculum and Learning Domain?

Standard 1: The student participates and makes progress in the regular Sunshine State Standards as appropriate for the individual student.

This standard allows for the modification of the regular Sunshine State Standards. The demonstration of achievement of this standard may be evidenced by the student's completion of a modification of the basic or vocational coursework. Course requirements can be modified based on the individual level of functioning or benchmark identified for the student. These modifications to basic or vocational course requirements may change the content and expectations of the course or make the program simpler. Because students with disabilities must have access to the general curriculum and the general curriculum for ALL students in the state of Florida is the regular Sunshine State Standards, teachers should consider using the regular standards first and making accommodations and modifications as necessary based on IEP team decisions.

Following are examples of modified basic course requirements based on the student's level of functioning:

English I Course #1001310 Course Requirement 1: Use reading strategies effectively to construct meaning from a range of technical, informative, and literary texts.

- An example of a modification at the independent level: Use reading strategies effectively to identify specific information in texts.
- An example of a modification at the supported level: Use reading strategies effectively when prompted to identify specific information in texts.
- An example of a modification at the participatory level: Participate in activities of peers using reading strategies effectively to identify specific information in texts.

These modifications may be documented through a variety of methods. Many districts require teachers to identify the specific standards or benchmarks that are being addressed in a particular lesson in daily lesson plans; modifications may be incorporated into this process. The *ESE Instruction Manager* is a tool that may be used to document modifications and achievement of course requirements. Teacher-developed methods may also be used to document modifications and achievement of the requirements.

Important Note: Modification of the regular Sunshine State Standards is not allowed for obtaining a standard diploma.

25. How do teachers document the achievement of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma if the student has earned credits in basic or vocational courses rather than ESE courses but has not passed the required test for graduation?

Commissioner of Education Rule 6-1.0996, FAC, specifies that mastery of the Sunshine State Standards through successful completion of courses that meet graduation requirements for a standard diploma, as stated in Rule 6A-1.09401(1)(a)-(g), FAC, shall be accepted in lieu of Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma.

Division of Public Schools and Community Education

Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services

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Expected Levels of Functioning
Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma

Student Name _____ School Year _____ Grade _____ Date _____

Mark the appropriate box to indicate the level of functioning expected for each standard.

Curriculum and Learning Environment Domain	Independent	Supported	Participatory
A.1. The student participates and makes progress in the Sunshine State Standards as appropriate for the individual student.			
B.1. The student locates, interprets, and uses oral, print, or visual information for a variety of purposes.			
B.2. The student expresses information effectively using oral, print, or visual formats for a variety of purposes.			
B.3. The student identifies and applies mathematical concepts and processes to solve problems.			
B.4. The student uses systematic approaches when solving problems.			
C.1. The student recognizes opportunities and responsibilities in the workplace.			
C.2. The student demonstrates skills and competencies needed for employment.			
Independent Functioning Domain			
A.1. The student engages in productive and leisure activities used in the home and community.			
A.2. The student accesses and uses community resources and services.			
B.1. The student manages personal, career, and other life decisions.			
B.2. The student demonstrates conduct that complies with social and environmental expectations.			
Social and Emotional Behavior Domain			
A.1. The student contributes to overall effort of the group.			
A.2. The student uses acceptable interpersonal skills when interacting with others.			
Communication Domain			
A.1. The student effectively communicates with others.			

Independent Level–Students are expected to be able to perform the behaviors identified for each benchmark *on their own* once they have mastered the knowledge and skills.

Supported Level–Students are expected to be able to perform the behaviors identified for each benchmark *with guidance and support*: physical, verbal, and visual prompts, assistive technology, and supervision.

Participatory Level–Students are expected to *participate with assistance* in the performance of the behavior: personal physical assistance and assistive technology.

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